Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

Iraq's Imperiled Democracy

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*T*HE republic of Iraq is the largest democratically gov-
erned country in the Arab world,[1] yet Iraq's democ-
racy is a troubled one, and its survival continues to hang
in the balance. Iraqis' commitment to democratic ideals
remains strong, but confidence in the current political sys-
tem is weak. Without urgent and drastic action, both by
Iraq and its friends, the country's political system is unlike-
ly to remain democratic beyond 2020. The United States
is seen in Iraq and in the wider region as the midwife
of Iraq's flawed democracy. Regardless of how America
evaluates its past decisions with regard to Iraq, its regional
prestige depends in no small part on the future of the Iraqi
democratic political system it helped create.

The challenges faced by non-Islamist and democrati-
cally and pluralistically inclined actors in Iraq are very
different from those in other Arab countries. Indeed, the
"Islamists or autocrats" dilemma is felt less acutely in
Iraq, where power is divided among numerous parties,
most of them at least nominally Islamist or religiously
oriented but all of which are committed, at least nomi-
nally, to continued free elections and the right of non-
Islamists to participate in the political process. Finding
avowed advocates of democracy in Iraq is an easy task.
The challenge is to identify which of those advocates are
sincere, and then to identify what kind of support they
need to fix the country's flawed political system.

DEMOCRACY BY CONSENSUS

The democratic order created by Iraq's 2005 constitu-
tion survives largely thanks to a vibrant multiparty sys-
tem and a culture of inclusive politics. Every Iraqi cabi-
net since the country's first post-Baath elections has
included Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish ministers, not just
as tokens but as actual representatives chosen by each
of these communities' elected members of parliament.
There is also competition within each community: each
of Iraq's three main ethnosectarian components con-
tains a multiplicity of political actors.

Eschewing winner-take-all competition, Iraq's politi-
cal system currently seeks to distribute power among

1. Iraq is not an entirely Arab country, but the politics of its au-
tonomous Kurdistan Regional Government are so indepen-
dent of those of the rest of the country as to necessitate a
separate analysis, which is beyond the scope of this report.

A series that explores how non-Islamist Arab political actors might facilitate progress toward reform and democratic transition.

the political representatives of each ethnosectarian component in a way that ensures a continued broad base of support for the post-2003 political order, so as to protect the republic from violent challenges by Sunni and Shiite militants while also containing demands for Kurdish separatism. Cross-sectarian political alliances are common, although these generally take the form of tactical deals on issues of shared interest. Only a handful of mostly marginal parties have true cross-sectarian appeal.

In Iraq, as in Lebanon, deep sectarian divisions coexist with a shared sense of patriotism and a belief, at least in principle, in cross-sectarian cooperation for the common good. But on the whole, Iraq's system of sectarian power sharing is less intricate than Lebanon's, and this is probably a blessing. Since 2005, every Iraqi prime minister has been a Shiite, while the parliament speaker has invariably been a Sunni and the president, largely a ceremonial position, has been a Kurd. Beyond this, few hard-and-fast rules determine allocation of positions, and there are no formal quotas or reserved seats for Shiites, Sunnis, or Kurds, whether in parliament or on the provincial councils—although such quotas do exist for some of the religious minorities: Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, and Mandaeans.

Iraq's electoral process on the whole remains free and competitive, despite being marred by occasional local abuses, mostly voter suppression in a few of the most war-stricken areas. Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, which contains representatives from multiple parties, has managed to remain impartial even in hotly contested races.[2] A decentralized system of local government, with elected provincial councils and governors, has helped prevent any one party from dominating national politics, and has also helped spread the political culture of democracy down to the grassroots level, even in remote and underdeveloped areas. At both the national and provincial levels, intensely competitive elections are generally followed by

the formation of broad coalitions, in which the losing faction is given significant power-sharing concessions that maintain the broad, cross-communal consensus needed to fight off the violent enemies of the post-Baath political order.

The downside of Iraq's system of democracy by consensus is the entrenchment of corrupt political patronage networks within every agency of government. Political parties compete more over control of executive positions than over the legislative agenda. Civil service appointments, and often even government contracts, are treated as spoils to be divided among the parties and given out as rewards to activists and supporters. Iraq's public sector, which employs 2.9 million of the country's roughly 30 million citizens, is like a series of overlapping fiefdoms of the various political parties. Partisan disputes prevent government agencies from disentangling overlapping areas of authority and impede efforts to prevent or punish corruption. Furthermore, such efforts are inevitably seen as targeting whichever party the accused are affiliated with.

The dysfunction of Iraq's political competition is exacerbated by weak rule of law and chaotic violence. Alongside the struggle against Islamic State militants, Iraq has been dealing for years with more widespread kinds of low-level political violence: intimidation of journalists and political opponents, mobs ransacking political party offices, and assassinations targeting even the most minor local political activists and government officials. These challenges resemble those faced by other struggling democracies around the world, from Ukraine to Nigeria, but their manifestations in Iraq are especially severe.

SECTARIANISM & MISRULE

The inherent weaknesses of Iraq's political system were further exacerbated by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's approach to politics during his second term in 2010–2014. Maliki centralized power in his own office, in particular stymying parliamentary oversight of the security services and subverting the military chain of command. During this period, corrupt security forces officers, many of whom had attained their commands through brib-

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2. Harith al-Qarawee, "Iraqi Election Commission in Spotlight," Al-Monitor, February 12, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/iraq-elections-commission-challenge-transparency.html.

ery, made it a standard practice to arrest Sunni citizens on baseless terrorism charges in order to extort money from their families for their release.[3]

Maliki arguably exploited the sectarian divide for partisan purposes, making selective use of counterterrorism laws to intimidate Sunni political opponents and stoke the paranoia of some Shiites, who saw neo-Baathist plots behind every Sunni attempt at political organization. The result of all this was a Sunni protest movement that began in January 2013 and escalated through Maliki's mishandling and deliberate political exploitation until Fallujah fell to insurgent forces that December. This set the stage for the Islamic State (IS) to escalate its mafia-style campaign of intimidation against government officials and security services in Sunni areas, culminating in the collapse of security forces in Mosul and much of central Iraq in June 2014.[4] That, in the midst of this descent, Maliki came as close he did to winning a third term in office after the April 2014 elections attests to the weakness and fragility of Iraqi democracy—especially in the face of sectarian polarization

Reforming the political environment is not a second priority to defeating IS: it is a necessary step to restoring state control in those Sunni areas still held by the group and to preventing the reemergence of similar groups in the future. The connection between reform and defeating IS is accepted by Iraqi leaders: Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi often associates corruption with terrorism in his speeches, sometimes going so far as to describe them as two fronts in a single war for Iraq's future.[5]

THE PROTEST MOVEMENT, MUQTADA AL-SADR, & THE PRESENT CRISIS

Iraq's political system is facing a serious crisis in public confidence, which may worsen during the summer, traditionally Iraq's season of political protests. In July 2015, demonstrations over electric blackouts in Basra escalated into a wave of nationwide protests against government corruption. Abadi responded by promising a major reform initiative, including a downsizing of the cabinet, the end of partisan and sectarian quotas in senior government posts, and a major new anticorruption drive.[6] Although at first well received by most parties and the media, Abadi's reform package quickly stalled, as his rivals began blocking his agenda and accusing him of consolidating power in his own hands under the pretext of reform. By early fall, disheartened pro-reform demonstrators had taken to chanting "Where is your promise, Abadi?"[7]

3. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Corruption in Iraq: 'Your Son Is Being Tortured. He Will Die if You Don't Pay,'" *Guardian*, January 15, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/16/corruption-iraq-son-tortured-pay. Over the course of 2012–2013, arrest-for-extortion became an increasingly open secret in Iraqi security circles, to the point that parliament member Izzat al-Shabandar, himself a longtime member of Maliki's party and a fellow Shiite, explained the situation thus: "Whenever there are more bombings... the next day, they make arrests, they say, sir, we've arrested 200 terrorists. I swear, of those 200, there will be maybe ten [terrorists], and the other 190, what becomes of them? They become enemies, because to prove their innocence takes months, and they won't be released unless they pay five or ten thousand dollars each. We should tell the truth. I used to hear these kinds of things, but now I've seen it for myself, how widespread this corruption is." See "Interview with Izzat al-Shahbandar," *Hadith Al Watan*, Alsumaria TV, December 12, 2013, http://www.alsumaria.tv/videos-on-Demand?title=hadis-al-watan-mr-izzat-shahbandar-episode-11&ID=4954.

4. For a detailed account of the Sunni protest movement, Maliki's response, and the descent into violence, see Kirk H. Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (Hudson Institute, August 9, 2014), http://www.hudson.org/research/10505-iraq-s-second-sunni-insurgency.

5. See, for example, Abadi's June 27, 2015, speech at a celebration marking 146 years of Iraqi journalism, covered by Al Jazeera, among others: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZHr1mkowYo.

6. Iraqi Prime Minister's Office, "Text of the First Reform Package Submitted by the Prime Minister, Dr. Hayder al-Abadi, in the Extraordinary Cabinet Session Held August 9, 2015," August 9, 2015, http://pmo.iq/press2015/9-8-201503.htm.

7. See, for example, video from protests in Baghdad, September 18, 2015, YouTube video, 0:33, September 21, 2015, posted by "Nashir al-Thawra," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whddu1lIJkg.

In March 2016, Abadi's effort to restore the momentum of his reform agenda by appointing a new nonpartisan cabinet of expert professionals ("technocrats," in Iraqi parlance) failed to win support from the political parties and was therefore not brought to a parliamentary vote. An effort to revise the plan only worsened matters. Some of Abadi's erstwhile allies, notably the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Kurdish parliamentary bloc, argued that the parties should have greater say in forming the new cabinet. Other parties, including the Sadrists, Ayad Allawi's al-Wataniya bloc, and followers of former prime minister Maliki, insisted Abadi not back down, although this was more cynical grandstanding than a genuine effort to advance Abadi's agenda. Meanwhile, followers of Muqtada al-Sadr began sit-in demonstrations outside the Green Zone, where parliament and the prime minister's office are located.

An April 13 session of parliament descended into fisticuffs, putting the legislative process in danger of a real breakdown. The following day, the Sadrist-Maliki-Allawi gathering held an emergency session to elect a new parliament speaker, a move whose legality was questionable at best. For a few days, Iraq faced the specter of a parliament split into two rival chambers with competing legal claims. An April 26 session confirmed five new cabinet members proposed by Abadi, but when an April 30 session failed to assemble a quorum, Sadr ordered his followers to break through the Green Zone's perimeter, which they proceeded to do, briefly occupying the parliament building and sending parliamentarians fleeing, some under a barrage of insults and projectiles.

The Sadrist protestors' assault on the parliament building shows that political dysfunction is a dire and imminent threat to Iraqi democracy. But the system still appears more likely than not to survive the present crisis. Neither Sadr nor any other leader has the popular support or organizational capability to install a new government through extralegal means, and all major parties would like to avoid a prolonged deadlock, which would undermine the state apparatus on which their patronage networks depend, and might even risk sapping the morale of the armed forces arrayed against the Islamic State.

Yet the risk to Iraqi democracy will not disappear even if the present parliamentary crisis is resolved. For now, Iraqis' commitment to democracy remains strong, both at the popular level and among political elites. But this commitment will wane if the democratic system remains so plagued by corruption and infighting that it cannot deliver security, stability, and development for the Iraqi people.

ISLAMISTS & SECULARISTS IN POLITICS

As already suggested, Iraq's multiparty system makes its politics more complex than a contest between autocrats and Islamists. The governing coalition, broadly defined, is made up of a wide array of parties, most of which proclaim some sort of religious agenda but are very different from the revolutionary Islamist movements seen in other Arab countries.

Even on a religious level, Iraq is suited to a very different kind of Islamic politics than that seen in Egypt or Tunisia. For the Shiite majority, democracy has become something bordering on a religious commitment. Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has been a relentless advocate of democratic elections since 2003, and his position is supported by other leading Najaf ayatollahs as well. Religious politicians may have ideas for how to make Iraq's government better adhere to their values, but, unlike Islamists elsewhere, they generally do not envision replacing existing state structures with new, ostensibly sharia-based authoritarian ones.

For most of the past decade, the largest of the Shiite political blocs, built around the Islamic Dawa Party, has called itself the State of Law Coalition, a name meant to downplay its Islamist origins. Even Iraq's more radical Shiite religious politicians generally support the democratic constitutional order, at least in principle. Muqtada al-Sadr, long famous for his militant anti-American rhetoric and cultlike following, told an interviewer in 2013 that "we need to make ourselves protectors of the democratic path," adding, "I want not so much to Islamize the civic ad-

vocates, but rather to teach civic politics to the Islamist current."[8]

Iraq's unique form of political Islam is in some ways a product of its recent history. To start with, the bitter experience of Saddam Hussein's rule has imparted Iraqis with a strong aversion to authoritarianism or one-party rule, and on top of this, the competition among Shiite Islamist parties since 2003 has been so intense as to preclude any one of them from dominating the state. At the same time, the experience of participating in government since 2003 has taught the Shiite Islamists that seizing the levers of power is not sufficient to achieve their vision for Iraqi society, and that rebuilding a new Iraq is a slow, tedious process in which functioning institutions, not revolutionary slogans, are the key building blocks.

Religious Sunni politicians in Iraq are also very different from those in other Arab countries. The Iraqi Islamic Party, the largest Sunni Arab Islamist party, takes its inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood but is not subordinate to the group's Egyptian-led global leadership. In the years following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, the Iraqi Islamic Party took advantage of every opportunity to participate in the political process, ignoring the militantly pro-insurgent and anti-American stance of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement. The Iraqi party's general secretary, Mohsen Abdel Hamid, explained its perspective in a September 2003 interview with Al Jazeera, saying he had found the U.S. officials then running Iraq open to dialogue and disagreement, in contrast to Saddam Hussein's regime, which acknowledged only two categories of interlocutors: propagandists or opponents.[9]

None of this is to say Iraq is safe from the threat posed by Islamist radicalism. Genuinely dangerous Islamist groups are operating in the country, seeking to undermine its democratic freedoms and tolerant social fabric. To provide but one example, the Islamic Fadhila Party, a Shiite group, has used its control of the Ministry of Justice to give Shiite custodians control of formerly Sunni mosques,[10] and has alarmed Christian and other minority communities by advancing a family-status law that orders minor children registered as Muslims if either of their parents converts to Islam.[11] But it is important to remember that Islamism in Iraq is very different from the phenomenon in other Arab countries, and that not every party or organization with a religious name is a radical, antidemocratic, or anti-Western group seeking to dominate state and society.

Islamist groups are the most powerful actors in Iraqi politics, but they are not alone on the scene. Former prime minister Allawi, as noted, leads the al-Wataniya bloc, a loose coalition of mostly Sunni politicians and a few Shiite opponents of the ruling coalition. In 2010, Allawi's coalition, running then under the name Iraqiyah, won the largest number of seats in parliament (91 out of 325) but was ultimately outmaneuvered in coalition negotiations, enabling Maliki to win a second term in office. Since then, Allawi's influence has declined greatly, and he is no longer a serious contender for prime minister. Since 2010, his coalition has shed many of its key members, such as Salih al-Mutlaq, whose Iraqi Front for National Dialogue shares Allawi's secular nationalist ideology but now functions as a separate parliamentary bloc. Due to fragmentation in the country's Sunni politics, Allawi's parliamentary faction was reduced by April 2015 to just 21 seats out of 328, and Mutlaq's to just 11 seats.[12]

Another key secular faction in parliament is the Mutahidun Coalition, led by brothers Usama and Atheel al-Nujaifi. Originally from Mosul, the Nujaifis began their political careers as secular Iraqi nationalists allied with Allawi but now advocate for the creation of autonomous, self-governing regions for the Sunni-majority areas of Iraq, modeled loosely on the Kurdistan Regional Government.

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8. Interview with Muqtada al-Sadr in *al-Mada*, published in two parts, March 25 and April 1, 2013: http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/newsdetails.aspx?newsid=260978 and http://washin.st/1qyEqUj.

9. *Liqa al-Youm* [Today's meeting], Al Jazeera, September 12, 2003, transcript, http://washin.st/1U4LkZ5.

10. "Cold War between Sunni and Shiite Waqfs over 'Usurpation' of Real Estate," Kirkuk Now, April 30, 2012, http://kirkuknow.com/arabic/?p=12117.

11. "Christians and Yazidis Boycott Parliamentary Conference on Coexistence: No Benefit in Slogans without Action," *al-Mada*, February 9, 2016, http://washin.st/255E8E1.

12. *The Guide to Iraqi Politics*, 2nd ed. (Utica Risk Services, April 25, 2015), p. 30.

The Nujaifis remain secular in their outlook, but their rhetoric of Sunni victimhood and autonomy is perhaps more sectarian and divisive than that of the Iraqi Islamic Party. The Nujaifis are eager to build strong ties with the United States—they maintain paid lobbyists in Washington—but their political vision is now limited to achieving Sunni autonomy rather than broader reforms of the Iraqi system. Their Sunni autonomy plan is unlikely to succeed, although more modest plans to increase the powers of provincial governments in Sunni areas might fare better. The Mutahidun holds ten seats in parliament[13] but enjoys an outsize influence due to the Nujaifi brothers' strong political relationships inside and outside Iraq.

REFORM ADVOCATES & PROTEST ORGANIZERS

In recent years, many Iraqis who seek an alternative to the religious parties have switched their hopes from older politicians like Allawi to a fresh generation of liberal activists, seemingly younger and disproportionately Shiite, who seek a new, cross-sectarian politics. These activists tend to describe their approach as civil (madani) rather than secular (ilmani) to emphasize that they are not hostile to religion but seek a political culture focused on individual rights, not on religious identity or sectarian power sharing. In parliament, this trend is represented by the Civil Democratic Alliance, which despite its tiny size (five seats)[14] has an outsize presence in parliamentary debates and the media, thanks in part to its outspoken MPs, including Shuruq al-Abayachi, Mithal al-Alusi, and Faiq Sheikh Ali.

Outside parliament, reform-minded civic activists have been organizing demonstrations for years, but these campaigns have only recently begun to produce results. Waves of popular demonstrations against corruption in 2011 and 2013 drew repeated promises of reforms but little else. The corruption, economic stagnation, and inadequate public utilities that first aroused these protests have yet to be adequately addressed, resulting over time in escalating dissatisfaction and cynicism among the protestors. The new round of demonstrations in July 2015 featured bolder demands than before, including a complete end to partisan and sectarian hiring quotas. The slogan "They robbed us in the name of religion" used by some demonstrators seemed to target the role of Shiite Islamist parties in general, rather than the specifics of their policies, suggesting a new turn in Iraqi politics. But as the weather cooled and electricity supply improved, the demonstrations also lost steam, and the lack of a strong national leadership prevented their consolidation into an effective political movement.

Despite resemblances between Iraq's summer 2015 protests, with their youth-filled crowds demanding change, and the demonstrations in other Arab countries since 2011, the Iraqi protest movement had different origins and has taken a very different course. To begin with, its leaders and spokesmen tend not to be youths or full-time political activists but rather academics and journalists, like Kadhim al-Sahlani, who teaches Japanese history at the University of Basra, or Ahmad Abdul Hussein, a journalist and poet.[15] And protest slogans have focused on demands for reform, such as the end to partisan quotas in government and tougher anticorruption measures. Recognizing that Iraq's democratic system distinguishes it from the regimes overthrown in the Arab Spring, the Iraqi protests generally lacked calls to oust the existing political order. Sahlani, for example, spoke in a television interview of the need to keep pressure on politicians for reform—a very different kind of goal from that expressed by protestors in authoritarian countries like Assad's Syria or Ben Ali's Tunisia.[16]

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13. Ibid., p. 29.

14. Ibid., p. 30.

15. During the summer 2015 protests, Ahmad Abdul Hussein used his Facebook account, with some 15,000 followers, to help organize demonstrations in Baghdad, as in this post from July 26, 2015: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1182781948415478&set=a.203881282972221.60714.100000510515631&type=1.

16. For Kadhim al-Sahlani's explanation of the summer 2015 protests' goals and methods, see his Al Jazeera interview on *Ma Wara al-Khabar* [Behind the news], YouTube video, 26:28, posted by "Kadhim Hailan," August 30, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81pRCvVzIJA.

Authorities allowed the peaceful protests to go forward under heavy protection from security forces. But a number of prominent activists have been kidnapped or murdered, with the crimes still unsolved—as, it should be noted, is the case with most such crimes in Iraq. The most prominent activist to suffer this fate, although certainly not the only one, is Jalal Shahmani, who was kidnapped from a restaurant in Baghdad's Waziriya neighborhood in September 2015 by gunmen in a three-vehicle convoy.[17]

Reports have also emerged of attacks on protestors by plainclothes thugs, generally assumed to be affiliated with some of the establishment Shiite Islamist parties,[18] but these do not seem to have been very common and did not end the protest movement. Rather, alongside the cooler weather, the protests lost momentum as politicians began to co-opt popular demands: Abadi, by adopting the call for reform as his own, and al-Sadr, who sent his followers to join the protestors in the fall.[19] The original "civic activists" who first organized the protests were left divided among those willing to give Abadi time, advocates of continued demonstrations in alliance with al-Sadr, and proponents of creating a new political party based on the protests—the last option being especially unpromising given the institutional strength of the existing parties on the one hand, and the public's distaste for party politics on the other.[20]

In the absence of a strong NGO sector or other independent civil society institutions in Iraq—most institutions describing themselves as such are actually party affiliated—and with a media landscape largely dominated by party-linked outlets, anticorruption demonstrations serve as the primary testing ground for new political ideas. Protest organizers are unlikely to coalesce into an electoral force, but many of their demands, from the idea of a nonpartisan cabinet to demands that provincial governments receive a share of oil revenues, have found their way into national political discourse. To be sure, these activists are unlikely to sweep away the existing order. But they can be valuable in helping develop and reform Iraq's political system—as long as they can maintain both a steady flow of constructive proposals and the popular momentum behind their demonstrations among a public increasingly cynical about the political process.

THE MILITIA THREAT

For Iraq's friends, helping the country preserve its democratic system of government means supporting it against two threats. The first is the imminent threat posed by lawless militias and warlordism over the next five years. The second, longer-term threat is that Iraq's political system could remain so dysfunctional as to invite a return to dictatorship, erasing all the gains made by the Iraqi people since 2003.

The militia threat is the more severe. Creative and determined action will be needed to defeat it. This threat was largely brought into being by Prime Minister Maliki's decision, in the final months of his second term, to authorize militia groups to join the army and police in the fight against the Islamic State. These groups, now organized as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), receive salaries and weapons from the Iraqi state but are organized by nonstate actors: mostly political parties but, in some cases, tribal or religious leaders. Contrary

17. "Amaliyat Baghdad: al-Bahth Jarin An al-Nashit Jalal al-Shahmani" [Baghdad operations command: search continues for activist Jalal al-Shahmani], *al-Bayan, September 28, 2015, http://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2015-09-28-1.2468454*.

18. Aktham Sayf al-Din, "Al-Milishiyat Tafidhdh Tadhahurat Baghdad, wa-l-Abadi Yuhadhdhir Min Tasyisiha" [Militias disperse Baghdad protests as Abadi warns against their politicization], *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, August 14, 2015, http://washin.st/1Tor4SC.

19. Sara al-Qahir, "Nushata Baghdad: Nataij Liqa al-Sadr Tadhhar al-Jumah Fi Sahat al-Tahrir" [Baghdad activists: results of meeting with al-Sadr will become clear next Friday in Tahrir Square], *al-Alem*, October 26, 2015, http://www.alaalem.com/index.php?aa=news&id22=33178.

20. Perhaps the most prominent advocate of creating a new party to advance the protest movement's aims is Najaf's Ali al-Dhabhawi, who announced the inception of his "Op-

position Youth Current" at a tiny gathering, videotaped and posted to Dhabhawi's Facebook page on January 2, 2016: https://www.facebook.com/571955909576977/videos/756561097783123/.

to perceptions in some Western circles, not all PMU factions are aligned with Iran.[21] But several of the largest and most powerful factions are Iran-backed groups with a history of militant violence against U.S. and coalition forces, Sunni and Kurdish civilians, and even Shiite political opponents.

The PMUs are popular among Iraqi Shiites, many of whom see its fighters as patriotic volunteers who helped block IS's advance as army units were collapsing in June 2014. But several of the PMUs' more powerful faction leaders have an open disdain for the democratic state structures and claim for themselves an extralegal power to fight real or perceived enemies of Iraq or of Shiite interests abroad. For example, Ali al-Yasiri, spokesman for Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, describes his group as an "ideological army" formed in response to the call by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to fight in Syria, which it continues to do under Iranian direction—the group's military leader, Hamid al-Jazayeri, describes Khamenei as the "commander" of all Muslims.[22] Abu Ala al-Hashemi, the leader of the powerful Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada faction, also says his group was originally formed to fight in Syria on Khamenei's orders and that "the world is divided into two camps, with no middle ground: the camp of Yezid [a seventh century Sunni caliph reviled by Shiites], represented today by the West, Israel, al-Qaeda, the Baathists, and ISIS. The other camp is Imam Hussein's."[23]

Several PMU faction leaders take Iran as their model for Iraq's political development: a weak and corrupt state, shepherded by religious leaders and networks of vigilante zealots who amass power and wealth in a never-ending campaign to protect Shiite society from imagined threats of Western economic domination or cultural subversion. The most radical leaders, who fought or claim to have fought the United States as insurgents, still see Iraq's elected government as somehow foreign controlled. Qais al-Khazali of Asaib Ahl al-Haqq is the most prominent such PMU leader. He has made open threats to attack U.S., Turkish, and Saudi targets in Iraq, accused Iraq's defense minister of "conspiring" against the country, and implicitly threatened to bring down the Iraqi government by force if it stands in his way.[24]

A whole crop of younger PMU figures, some of whom lack Khazali's pedigree as an insurgent, have adopted his rhetoric instrumentally, invoking the government's supposed illegitimacy at every turn to justify their lawless behavior. After several members of Saraya al-Khurasani were killed in an April 2015 gunfight with local police in Balad, in southern Salah al-Din province, the group's spokesman, Yasiri, gave a rambling press conference, complaining of "ISIS inside the government," and spoke ominously of the need to "wipe out ISIS from inside the Iraqi population."[25]

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21. For a discussion of PMU integration with the Iraqi military, with a focus on the al-Abbas Combat Division, which is sponsored by the administrators of Iraq's Shiite shrines, see Michael Knights, *The Future of Iraq's Armed Forces* (Baghdad: Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2016), pp. 29–33.

22. Interviews with Ali al-Yasiri and Hamid al-Jazayeri on *Banadiq al-Dhil* [Shadow rifles], Dijlah TV, February 22, 2015: YouTube video, 31:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rUV6cODvfM.

23. Interview with Abu Ala al-Hashemi on *Banadiq al-Dhil* [Shadow rifles], Dijlah TV, April 25, 2015: YouTube video, 27:57, posted by "mohannad mph," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfibLPkJXj4.

24. Interview with Qays Al Khizaali on *Ghayr Mutawaqqa* [Unexpected], Alsumaria TV, January 7, 2016, http://www.alsumaria.tv/program/485/alsumaria-programs/9578/Episodes/ghayr-moutawaqaa-sheikh-qays-al-khizaali-episode-3. On this program, Khazali explicitly discussed his group's preparations to attack Turkish targets inside Iraq, accused Iraq's defense minister, Khaled al-Obeidi, of "plotting" with Turkey, and, at around minute 14:00, cracked up laughing while explaining the operational challenges involved in blowing up Saudi Arabia's embassy in Baghdad. See also: Interview with Qais al-Khazali, al-Sharqiya TV, December 4, 2015: YouTube video, 52:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dKeDmf0dCc. Khazali implicitly threatened to take action against the Iraqi government if it allowed U.S. ground forces into the country, saying this would make Iraq's government "illegitimate."

25. Saraya Talia al-Khurasani press conference, April 5, 2015: YouTube video, 29:12, April 5, 2015, posted by the group's media department, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CnBkWp_MGo.

FACING THE MILITIA THREAT

Reining in the PMUs' radical factions is an urgent challenge for Iraqi democracy but not an easy one. Some politicians within Prime Minister Abadi's governing coalition support the radicals' program, while others are allied with them temporarily out of tactical considerations. The PMUs' formidable political and military power means they are unlikely to be disarmed or fully subordinated to state authority this year or next, and any such proposal would likely produce a violent backlash. But Iraqi state authorities, and even the leaders of several of the more moderate PMU factions, are well aware that Iraq must ultimately rein in the radical militants: Muqtada al-Sadr has been very explicit on this point, while the Badr Organization's Hadi al-Ameri and his subordinate, Interior Minister Mohammed Salem al-Ghabban, also clearly recognize the problem, even if they discuss it in comparatively guarded terms.[26]

The United States can best support the Iraqi government in dealing with the PMUs by providing assistance and support at a pace dictated by Iraqi authorities themselves. Public condemnations of the PMUs or other direct measures will only inflame the situation and play into the radicals' anti-American rhetoric. The wiser path is to provide aid and support to Iraq's internal security forces and its law enforcement apparatus, to create a more

stable security environment in which lawless militias find it more difficult to operate.

To reduce the militias' role, the United States should be looking for ways to strengthen the ability of formal state security forces to maintain order. Iraq is already trying to go in this direction, as seen in initiatives introduced over the past two years, including the National Identification Card, which replaces earlier, easily forged identification documents such as the jinsiya, and the Baghdad Hawk program, which has enlisted outside contractors to create an electronic database of vehicles registered in Baghdad for the security forces' use. Iraqi leaders know they must modernize their approach to internal security and are open to receiving assistance from other countries to implement this vision.

Upgrading Iraq's security architecture is not as simple as funding new technology. Basic security tools and techniques such as security cameras, intelligence databases, and proper tracking of badges and credentials have yet to see effective widespread implementation in Iraq, due to the inertia of old, pre-electronic systems as well as to logistical challenges like electric blackouts. Even if these obstacles are overcome, militia groups may try to block any measure that makes it harder for them to move and carry out armed activities undetected, especially if they perceive such measures as being U.S.-directed. Careful coordination with Iraqi authorities will be needed, guided by a keen sense of local political dynamics. In most cases, the less publicity this kind of U.S. security assistance to Iraq receives, the better. U.S. policymakers should also keep in mind that some assistance may be most effectively provided by other members of the anti–Islamic State coalition.

The goal of U.S. security aid should not be to target or undermine the PMUs as an institution. The Iraqi government will have to make its own decisions in time about how it wants the PMUs to be structured and eventually integrated into the state. U.S. policy should aim at helping position Iraq's elected government to make this decision for itself, without fear of militia violence. Framed in this manner, aid from the United States and its allies will likely be welcomed by mainstream Iraqi leaders from all major ethnosectarian groups. Even those who are suspi-

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26. Muqtada al-Sadr addressed this issue in a written response to a question from a follower, posted on the website of the "Personal Office of His Excellency Hojjat al-Islam the Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr," September 12, 2015: http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/8449.html. Badr's Hadi al-Ameri threatened to prosecute "troublemakers" behind recent PMU-Peshmerga clashes in Tuz Khormato, as reported by Badr's al-Ghadeer TV on April 26, 2016: http://www.alghadeer.tv/news/detail/39383/. Mohammad Salem al-Ghabban addressed the issue in an interview with Iraqiya TV's program "VIP," uploaded to the internet January 7, 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZHr1mkowYo. Ghaban has also pursued the issue through less public channels, although so far without much success; see Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Fears in Iraqi Government, Army over Shiite Militias' Power," Associated Press, March 21, 2016, http://bigstory.ap.org/urn:publicid:ap.org:9696d8589a774c33a2e29aaf9699330c.

cious of U.S. motives and see a broad future role for the PMUs recognize that the security forces must be empowered to meet the challenge of nonstate armed actors, or else Iraq will face dissolution into anarchy reminiscent of failed states like Somalia or Yemen.

The militia threat may seem less urgent than dealing with IS, but it indeed poses the greater potential menace to Iraq's survival as a democracy. If the United States sees Iraqi democracy as worth supporting, then the militia threat must be addressed. Compared to military aid for the anti-IS fight, the struggle against militia violence requires a more cautious and flexible approach, at both the political and technical levels. Therefore, the effort to help Iraq rein in militias deserves careful attention from the U.S. government, alongside the more public efforts to defeat IS.

BROADER ENGAGEMENT TO SUPPORT DEMOCRACY IN IRAQ

The longer-term challenges facing Iraqi democracy will require a similarly nuanced approach. U.S. policymakers should adopt a sober and realistic attitude to political engagement with Iraq, recognizing that the United States cannot and should not dictate solutions to Iraq's domestic political problems. The U.S. government is still an important partner for Iraq, but it can no longer play the midwifing role to the country's democratic institutions that it did in the 2003–2011 period. Many Iraqis remain suspicious of U.S. motives, partly because of past experiences and partly because of newer suspicions fed by anti-American propaganda, such as absurd allegations that the United States secretly supports the Islamic State. Outside the Kurdistan Region, a reputation for close relations with Washington can be more of a burden than an asset for Iraqi politicians.

The U.S. political engagement strategy for Iraq should channel resources into nonpartisan channels, providing support to the democratic process itself rather than for specific political actors. Many of Iraq's biggest political problems, such as the issue of sectarian quotas in government or the question of Sunni autonomy, are not amenable to solutions offered by the U.S. government.

But Washington can be constructive in helping Iraq deal with some of its other challenges: the struggle against corruption, the need for better education of both politicians and the public about democratic processes, and greater professionalization of institutions in a democratic society, from the courts to the media.

The U.S. government is already actively working on these issues, most prominently through USAID's extensive training and professional development programs which have reached civil servants in 15 provinces of Iraq. These kinds of efforts can be expanded, especially to provide more opportunities for Iraqi participants to travel to the United States and see the American democratic process first hand.

Given the limits of U.S. government capabilities, and the existing political sensitivities between the United States and Iraq, it may prove more fruitful for America to help Iraq build ties with other U.S. allies and with the nongovernmental sector. European and Arab states interested in participating in the fight against IS, but unwilling to commit ground troops, could still help Iraq overcome its challenges by hosting training courses and conferences for Iraqis or, better yet, by promoting people-to-people diplomacy with Iraqi cultural, educational, and media institutions. These kinds of ties will certainly not be decisive in saving Iraq, but they can give hope to Iraqi advocates of democracy and plant the seeds for future reform efforts.

It is important that these opportunities be offered to Iraqis from as wide a range of ethnic, sectarian, and political backgrounds as possible to avoid giving the false impression that the United States or its allies are vying to put some particular group into power. Secularists and non-Shiites are especially vulnerable to such accusations, and the participation of individuals affiliated with some of the Shiite Islamist parties in these programs can help dispel such claims.

LESSONS FOR THE REGION

Iraq was the first Arab country in the twenty-first century to experience the overthrow of an authoritarian regime—albeit by an outside invasion rather than through revolution. Iraq's experience was uniquely shaped by

the Baath Party's legacy, by the U.S. invasion's empowerment of the exiled opposition parties, by the country's ethnosectarian diversity, and by the experience of war and insurgency. Other Arab countries will, of course, follow different paths, but they can still draw lessons from both Iraq's successes and its failures in its democratic experiment.

One key lesson from Iraq is that a strong multiparty system, in which actors accept each other as legitimate representatives of their respective constituents, can help preserve democratic politics even when rule of law is weak. A second lesson is that devolving power to elected provincial or local governments can help spread the culture of democratic politics, as well as providing an avenue for power sharing among competing political groups.

In examining the many setbacks Iraqi democracy has encountered, a common thread through most of them is this: economic underdevelopment and political underdevelopment go hand in hand. Iraq's cutthroat system of competing patronage networks and militia violence is in part the product of an underdeveloped financial sector, and a cash economy that is extremely vulnerable to corruption and organized crime. Politicians, for example, protected their patronage networks by delaying even straightforward measures such as the digitization of payroll rosters, which could have rescued government institutions from the massive corruption that left military units vulnerable to collapse against the Islamic State. For Iraq and other regional countries, the struggle to implement democracy necessitates a simultaneous effort to win support from political stakeholders for the economic reforms needed to bring stability and prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Iraq's political system is unique in the Arab world. The sharp competition among powerful religious parties—especially within the Shiite community—means that Islamists, at least in the term's broad sense, hold power without implementing authoritarian rule and without shutting non-Islamist actors out of the political arena. But the power sharing among Iraq's Islamists operates through dysfunctional arrangements that fail to meet the Iraqi people's basic aspirations for security, development, and economic growth. Many of Iraq's Islamist politicians have come to recognize that reforming this system in a more liberal direction is an urgent task and that, if they fail, the alternatives of authoritarianism or anarchy would prompt a substantial decline in their own power, not to mention the damage to Iraq's future.

At present, a return to dictatorship in Iraq seems unthinkable, given the state's weakness and the Islamists' internal divisions. At the same time, the state's all-dominating economic power, via oil revenues, militates against an imminent collapse into anarchy. Thus, while neither dictatorship nor state collapse can be ruled out, for now the post-2003 political order endures, and has good odds of continuing to do so even if substantial reforms are implemented.

The most dangerous alternative to democracy in Iraq is an Iranian style of government consisting of competing, nominally Islamist cliques—the rule of thieves and bullies in the guise of theocracy. The Iraqi version of this system, run by militiamen rather than clerics and without an overarching Supreme Leader, would be even more lawless and violent than the Iranian original and would leave Iraq poorer and more internationally isolated than at any time since 2003.

The advocates of militia rule in Iraq are well armed and determined, and they of course benefit from Iran's political and economic support. But the militias' own competition and infighting undermine their efforts. And they face a formidable opposition in the many Iraqis, both Islamists and liberals, who understand that only democratic politics and the rule of law can secure Iraq's long-term security and prosperity.

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